

*Transgressive Gestures: Women and Violin Performance in  
Eighteenth-Century Europe*

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Hester Bell Jordan

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## Abstract

Studies concerning eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century women musicians abound within recent musicological scholarship, but the focus on singers and keyboard players – whose musical activities are understood to have “affirmed” their femininity – has had the effect of obscuring players of less typical instruments. Violin-playing, frequently cast as a man’s activity and imbued with indecent associations, was a case in point. Yet despite the connotations of the instrument, a small but significant group of women did play the violin: it is these violinists that this thesis takes as its central focus. Looking first at the complex reasons behind objections to women’s violin performance, a number of factors that restricted women’s access to the violin – including the influence of the male gaze and limits placed on women’s physical movement – are revealed. Particular conditions nevertheless enabled certain women to play the violin, namely the personal, educational, and economic support available from diverse sources such as family members, patrons, and institutions like convents and the Venetian *ospedali*.

In addition to placing women violinists in their historical context, this thesis centres on an analysis of a violin concerto by one of the most well-known female violinists of the era, the Italian virtuoso Regina Strinasacchi. The analysis of Strinasacchi’s Violin Concerto in B flat major is strongly performance based and focuses on the issue of gender and physical movement (*performance gesture*), topics which were of much interest to eighteenth-century commentators who witnessed women violinists performing. As such the analysis engages with concepts from “embodied” musicology. In exploring Strinasacchi’s concerto we see that female violinists could experiment with a variety of gendered roles through violin performance, embodying both masculinity and femininity through their transgressive gestures. By taking a closer look at women’s violin performance and experiences, this thesis aims to show that these violinists were not as peripheral to the workings of the wider musical community as is sometimes implied. Furthermore, it aims to put women violinists more firmly at the centre of their own stories, challenging the tendency to treat female violinists as novel anomalies.

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